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SUBJECT: SPAIN CONCERNED ABOUT GIBRALTAR SHIP VISIT

Classified By: A/DCM Kathy Fitzpatrick for reasons 1.4 (b) & (d).

¶1. (C/NF) SUMMARY: On July 26, a top Foreign Ministry official called the Ambassador on orders from his minister to register Spain's concern with the upcoming visit of a US nuclear-powered submarine to Gibraltar. The GOS did not specifically request cancellation of the visit, but suggested that it would be easier on everyone if the sub were to stop at the nearby Spanish base at Rota instead of Gibraltar. The Ambassador replied that, while Gibraltar issues are handled by Embassy London, he would pass the message. He also said that it is a routine port visit, families are already on their way to meet the crew, no repairs are scheduled, and the visit is likely to go forward as planned. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C/NF) MFA DG for Europe and North American Jose Pons called the Ambassador on July 26 to discuss the upcoming visit of a US submarine to Gibraltar. Prior to this call, the Spanish navy summoned the Defense Attache to discuss the same issue. An informal approach was also made via the Spain-US Permanent Committee (which implements the bilateral defense treaty). In addition, press and military staff from the British Embassy contacted their counterparts in Embassy Madrid to alert us that a nuclear submarine visit to Gibraltar was likely to become a public issue for us, as it usually is for them. (COMMENT. The British confided, however, that they were delighted the US submarine would visit take place. END COMMENT.)

¶3. (C/NF) Pons told the Ambassador that he was calling on orders from Minister Moratinos to register Spain's concern with the impending visit of a US nuclear submarine to Gibraltar. He did not formally request a cancellation or change of the visit. Pons said that pierside submarine visits at Gibraltar routinely cause public protests by environmental groups. He said protests could be avoided simply by moving the port visit to the nearby Spanish base at Rota, where the visit would be simpler and more discreet.

¶4. (C/NF) The Ambassador reminded Pons that he has no authority over issues related to Gibraltar, which is an issue for Spain and the UK to resolve. He reassured Pons that this port visit has no political significance, but is simply a routine stop at a port that the US Navy routinely visits. The Ambassador told Pons that the EUCOM had made this decision and was unlikely to change it at this late date because preparations are set and families already have tickets to Gibraltar to visit crew members. (NOTE. The last pierside US submarine visit was in July 2004. US submarines routinely stop at Gibraltar at anchorage to exchange personnel without pulling up to the pier. The GOS has raised no concern about these visits, nor about the pierside visits

of US surface ships. END NOTE.)

15. (C/NF) Contacts from the British Embassy in Madrid told us that they get calls from MFA, the press, and environmental groups each time that a British nuclear submarine visits Gibraltar, approximately quarterly. These visits have been a particular issue since the British submarine Tireless spent several months in Gibraltar in 2000 for repairs to its nuclear propulsion system. Although there was no problem, and in fact the repairs did not directly involve nuclear components, public concern stemmed from the potential risk of exposure to nuclear material in the event of an accident. In the wake of that incident, Spain and Britain negotiated an agreement confirming that British ships would continue to visit Gibraltar and that the British would keep the GOS well-informed of ship visits.

16. (C/NF) COMMENT. The US Navy should continue to send ships to Gibraltar as appropriate. At the same time, it is important to remember that Gibraltar is a sensitive issue for both Britain and Spain in which the US maintains careful neutrality. Because of this political context, it is important to consider the timing of ship visits. Embassy Madrid appreciates the opportunity to be informed well in advance of planned port visits in order to provide the most effective advice to military leaders.  
AGUIRRE